JOHN WOOD on the edge of clear meaning

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Catalogue produced by Harland Snodgrass, 1975–1976.

Matter Out of Place:

Notes on Experiential Learning in a Studio Foundation Program

Ezra Shales

"I remember standing on a cinder block and facing off against Professor Wood. We both held onto a foot-long rope and the trick was to pull the other person off balance."[1,2] This memory of an awkward silence, in which a teacher tested physical and perceptual boundaries and a student learned to ask *why*, conveys John Wood's legacy of experimentation and experiential learning. In 1954, when he joined the faculty of Alfred's New York State College of Ceramics in rural western New York to teach two-dimensional design and "visual fundamentals," Wood brought with him skepticism about whether making art was an investigation or a skill.[3] Over time, the small fifty-year-old school originally dedicated solely to ceramics would become the School of Art & Design, and Wood played a role in introducing several new media. Largely because of Wood's interest in collaborative teaching and communal searching, Alfred developed a "Foundation Program," a rigorous basic training for first-year students that was distinguished by work outside of traditional skills and media. At Alfred, and at numerous other art schools emulating the Bauhaus in the twentieth century, a balance was struck between emphasizing a core curriculum of skills (such as drawing, color, and spatial analysis) and a process of open-ended inquiry. Physically teetering fell under the latter activity, what the influential educator György Kepes defined as the journey from "eyesight to insight."[4]

Wood's vision for a Foundation Program was shared by several peers at Alfred, especially William Parry and Robert Turner. Their integration of humanist self-exploration and technical investigation into a fine art curriculum was one of several American adaptations of Bauhaus pedagogy that sprang into being in the second half of the twentieth century. Unlike his colleagues, Wood had himself experienced a curricular year at Chicago's Institute of Design that was a Bauhaus-derived "Foundation Program."[5] While in many academies these art-initiation programs ossified into formalist aesthetic concerns, Wood's was one of the voices at Alfred keeping an alternative tradition of irrational Modernism alive, such as collage and Moholy-Nagy's notion of "facture." Wood found the latter term reading *Vision in Motion* by László Moholy-Nagy[6] before he went to art school, and the book's attention to industry, art, and craftsmanship and the problem of pictorially transcribing landscape, technology, and time, delineate many of Wood's lasting concerns.

1 Mary Lu Wells, interview with the author, Alfred, NY, March 11, 2007.

2 I thank the many collegial voices in the hills of Alfred, especially Roger Freeman, John Gill, Ted Morgan, Mario Prisco, Fred Tschida and both John and Carol Wood, for sharing their recollections, and some who have passed through before my time, especially Eric Renner, Harland Snodgrass, and Jessie Shefrin. Above all, thanks to Nathan Lyons for welcoming me to analyze someone so important to him, and introducing me to John.

3 For a general history of Alfred University see Melvin H. Bernstein, *Art and Design at Alfred; A Chronicle of a Ceramics College* (Philadelphia: Associated University Presses, 1986).

4 György Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944), 12.

5 See Alain Findeli and Charlotte Benton, "Design Education and Industry: The Laborious Beginnings of the Institute of Design in Chicago," *Journal of Design History* 4, no. 2 (1991): 97-113.

6 László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947).

The "2 x 4 x 8" project introduced the idea of modules, 1975. Photograph by Harland Snodgrass.

Expecting an art education curriculum to institutionalize the removal of a student's assumptions and inhibitions is a contradictory pursuit. Coursework must permit a degree of flux and improvisation or risk becoming academic in the worst sense of the word. Wood aimed for Moholy-Nagy's "new threshold of perception" and social relevance. His constructivist pedagogy came from John Dewey in addition to the Bauhaus. Modernist art theory viewed materials and media as "ineluctable"—intransigent and ineffable forces to grapple—and students as emotional, psychological creatures to develop. The Foundation Program that developed at Alfred navigated these critical, contested issues.

Although Wood was a leader in charting the pedagogical outlook, his approach was atmospheric, not bureaucratic. His distinctive strength as a teacher was to welcome experimentation and new media, and to design problems that effaced the boundaries between media. He was an advocate of teaching outside of one's developed talents. He challenged students to work outside the classroom, rupturing the traditional teacher-student relationship of master and apprentice by drawing alongside them. He was permissive. If a student wanted to paint Wood's bedroom purple, Wood let him, and it was an art project. Wood's art included making a film of a student painting a wall white. Today's codified boundaries do not permit such play to run wild. More than any of his colleagues, his studio practice roamed across pastures of different media and intersected with the media used in Foundation. For more than three decades, Wood propelled new media into Alfred, and is single-handedly responsible for introducing numerous

methods of printmaking: type composition, lithography, photography and photolithography. His interests helped turn Alfred's school of ceramics into a multi-media art program. These acts of transplantation were a revolution.

Exercises in the Foundation Program were intended to institute disequilibrium in Alfred's curriculum, and to ensure that searching, listening, and looking would be the first steps towards making art. "Dirt," anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, is "matter out of place," suggesting the type of mental and physical displacement required for experimentation.[7] Wood's teaching ran parallel to his method of working in the studio; a gelatin silver photograph on which he spilled asphaltum embodies the concept of "dirt." Whether Wood required students to draw in the studio or compose their bodies into a line across the hillside, he hoped they would experience displacement and relocation. A page of Wood's notes from the 1970s set out six goals for Foundation and one important caveat. In all likelihood, these points were originally the work of several authors; so much the better for identifying the *zeitgeist* of the Foundation Program. Students' projects were to:

involve the senses
remove preconceived ideas
create relationships
give confidence
give knowledge of [the] nature of materials
[give knowledge of the nature of] tools[8]

Appended to these at the top of the same page, Wood scribbled "Every problem" should be "presented with minimum of explanation and examples such that meaningful solutions be possible by each student." The program was student-centered to a degree—it was also intensely challenging.

TOOLS AND THE NATURE OF MATERIALS

Wood was initially an albatross at Alfred, as he was one of the few who taught outside of the ceramics studios. He did not fret about deviating from Alfred's traditional paths of study. Wood was hired at Alfred University because he was not a clay worker. Charles Harder, Alfred's ceramist-director, invited Wood to join the staff in 1954, expecting him to infuse the school with a more rigorously intellectual idea of design. Katherine Nelson was already teaching painting and two-dimensional design when Wood arrived, but like Harder, she had an ethos rooted in an earlier, Arts and Crafts sense of the applied arts. Harder wanted to supplant the assumption that "design" was a purely vocational application of art making. He thought Wood would inject Modernism into the curriculum, but not necessarily displace clay from its throne.

Harder saw Wood as evidence that art and design could be mutually informative and supportive. Wood was trained in the "New Bauhaus" curriculum recently transplanted into Chicago by émigré Moholy-Nagy. Utopian

7 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1966), 36.

8 John Wood, undated Alfred notebooks, in the author's possession.

and practical aspirations were held in equal measure. He came to Alfred ready to teach theories of composition and design that operated across disciplinary boundaries, not to prepare students for one track of study. Harder saw his recruitment of Chicago talent as a way to revitalize design in the curriculum, and connect it to an expansive vision of post-war American art that went beyond arguments over art or functionalism. Harder changed the name of the Alfred program multiple times, from Ceramic Art to Industrial Ceramic Design in 1941, to Industrial Design in 1948, and to Ceramic Design in 1951. Harder's wavering faith to labels deserves some empathy. He was desperately trying to balance an expansive view of art and design, seeking collaboration with the automobile industry and also embracing advocates of manual crafts such as Bernard Leach. Harder admired both Henry Ford and folk ceramics, and believed the school had room enough for students inclined towards either of these two poles. Wood's 1955 course in "Visual Fundamentals" was Harder's hope for a new synthetic curriculum that could span these diverse ideas of art and design.

The new processes and materials Wood brought to Alfred first included wood type and a hand press, then lithography, photography, and some of the earliest photolithography done in an American art school. Former student Judy Lerner remembers Wood teaching her to combine the lithography press and proof press to create innovative overlays. Students improvised with the limited technology, transferring slugs of Bodoni type to litho stones to print artists' books. One of Wood's serious students in the 1950s, Lerner crawled through a window to work in the studio on the weekend.[9] Wood added typography to the curriculum to explore composition, not as a way to compose commercial prototypes. He filmed his hands setting type and diagramming the mechanics of the press. Eventually, he set up a darkroom with his own equipment and a lithography studio, which was no small achievement in a school that had no existing facilities in these areas. His colleagues were also experimenting and crossing boundaries. Wood acknowledges that over the decades many other professors also deserve credit for expanding Alfred's tool kit. It was a small school in 1960, so that Daniel Rhodes, Alfred's ceramist with a national reputation, was teaching painting and collage. In 1971, the Department of Ceramic Design became the Department of Art, and then in 1973, the School of Art and Design, changes indicating the school's progress into "a Noah's Ark of artists."[10] As the tool kit grew it reflected the changing definition of art materials and their hierarchies in the world at large. Suddenly, Alfred's graduates were achieving prominence in the fields of lithography and graphic design too. Printmaking opened the door to the formation of a very different school.

CREATE RELATIONSHIPS

Wood's students from the 1950s remember his honesty about his own lack of a detailed road map when he first arrived. He respected their excursions into literature and drama. His generosity in art was driven by curiosity. His teaching notes span diverse influences and go beyond limited notions of art, craft, or design. Marginalia in his sketchbooks from the 1960s and 1970s ranges from references to psychology to modular construction, logos and architecture. He exposed students to cement construction by Paolo Nervi, editing by Sergei Eisenstein, modular furniture by Charles

9 Judy Lerner, interview with the author, New York, NY, July 15, 2006.

10 Mario Prisco (former Dean of the School of Art & Design), interview with the author, Alfred, NY, June 17, 2006.

and Ray Eames, volumetric ceramics by John Mason, montage-collage posters by A. M. Cassandre, and branding by Paul Rand. Few artists define art this broadly, but Wood saw connecting the trade mark, package, letterhead, and catalog to contemporary art as important. John Wood's interest in "commercial" typography is emphasized here to illustrate the ways in which he avoided the imposition of boundaries and provincial sub-divisions on art-making and culture in general. His doodles were just as likely to riff on Paul Rand's logos as they were to study the structure of a leaf or flower. Think *wabi-sabi* Westinghouse.

Considering "relationships" in terms of human ecology by the late 1960s, art educators saw "industrial design" as the antithesis of "conceptual art" and "creativity." Wood taught "Visual Fundamentals" and "Introduction to Design" in those years, but Harder's original mandate for these classes faded into obscurity. Courses became more centered on studio self-investigation than on communication arts. Wood enriched his courses with environmentalist questions. He sustained lively interests in early "green" debates and printed booklets on outhouses and recycling, and with several other colleagues sympathized with student civil disobedience against the Vietnam War; these were awkward decisions in a small school in a tiny town.

Wood was unusual at Alfred, but not isolated. Rhodes might have scoffed at Wood's dabbling in ceramics, but Wood maintained curiosity in mark-making on a convex form. In 1960, the head of the ceramics school, Ted Randall, wrote a letter of support so that Wood could photograph the premier collections of Anasazi pottery in New Mexico. His interest in Mimbres pots directly related to his own drawing and to teaching kinetic movement in drawing. It is humorous to think that Wood, the non-clay-worker, opted to teach students to explore clay even though it was not part of his skill set or studio practice. He was open to all media, but certainly not bound to any one.

REMOVE PRECONCEIVED IDEAS

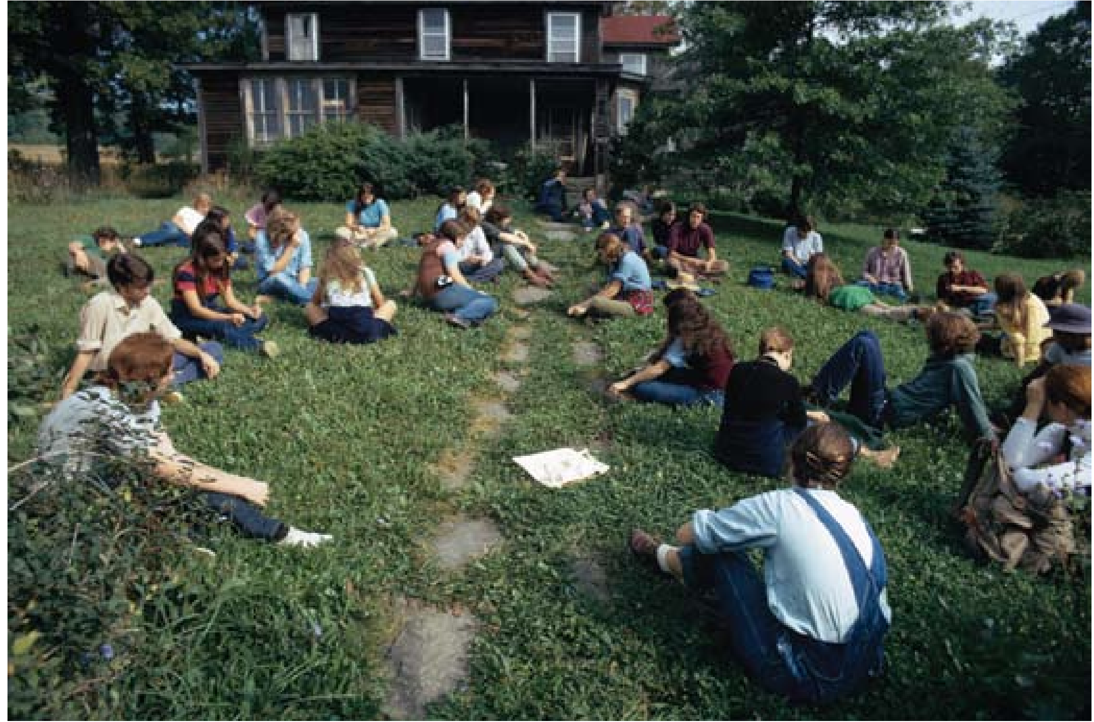
A 1973 memo in the Alfred archives documents the formal institutionalization of the Foundation Program and the mission to cultivate "areas of study" and "group dynamics"—not "drawing" or "color." The late 1960s florescence of political dissent swept through Alfred as well as Paris and San Francisco, and the Foundation Program can be interpreted as a direct response to a demand for a more socially relevant curriculum. The Foundation Program was "a beginning toward a working philosophy of creative activity."[11] The Bauhaus-derived notion of regaining the sense of play from childhood was a critical goal.[12] The Foundation Program at Alfred arose in 1969 when John Wood and Eric Renner combined their two-dimensional and three-dimensional design classes. From this ad-hoc beginning evolved a team-taught, four-faculty program. It was intended to be a process-oriented experience that would expand horizons in media, problem-solving, and identity.

For several years, the first day of class would consist of a trip to the fields and woods of John's large property up the road from school, proof that "art did not only happen in school."[13] Like treasure hunts in reverse, students drew maps of the town out of words and lines. Going out on an expedition would lead to frustration, sometimes even apathy, but students remember circling back to the sensation of gaining intimacy with peers by the creek.

11 Memorandum, faculty documents, Box 6, Folder 1973-4, Archives, NYSCC.

12 Architectural historian Reyner Banham described Itten's Vorkurs as "the determination to cleanse every incoming student's mind of all preconceptions and to put him, so to speak, back into Kindergarten to start again from scratch." Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980), 278.

13 E. Jessie Shefrin, interview with the author, telephone, August 30, 2007.



The Freshman Foundation meeting in John's front yard on the first day of the semester, 1972. In this glimpse of an early Foundation class meeting outside Wood's house on Moland Road, the benefits of intimate class size is apparent, as is the atmosphere of informality. Getting a conversation going often preceded exploring materials or assigning specific problems. Photographer unknown.

Scaling buildings gave them a sense of where they would work. Wood did not give students a center to the map, or define its boundaries; he asked only that they pay attention and look with care. The experience of drawing became a question of mark-making to steer away from pre-conceived notions of quality and illustration.

GIVE CONFIDENCE

Building students' confidence is an essential component of teaching art, even if the average art student's cocky plumage often hides his or her need for appreciation. Wood's generosity towards students could be exemplary, even with students outside of his discipline. "One day John Wood told me that he liked my pots and asked me if I would like to trade for his prints," confided alumnus Lewis Krevolin. "My feet didn't touch the ground for days."[14] Boosting an individual's confidence in his art was one knack; Wood also had a talent for sustaining a collective group purpose because he loved rolling up his sleeves and working alongside students.

In the heady era of turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Alfred faculty began to formally organize a Foundation curriculum that would counter emphasis on individualism by fostering collective work. The Foundation Program emerged as a core curriculum to establish community in an era of dissension.[15] Although Wood held a central role in establishing the Foundation Program, professor of sculpture William Parry chaired it from its

14 Lewis Krevolin, interview with the author, telephone, April 14, 2007.

15 In retrospect, the Foundation Program had parallels outside the College of Ceramics. In 1971, President Miles wanted to make Alfred University's Liberal Arts program less about career-training and demanded Alfred produce "the comprehensive man" by broadening the liberal arts education. In contrast to Wood's attempt to institute disequilibrium, Miles wanted to a more systematic organization. See David M. Ohara, "The Liberal Arts," in *A Sesquicentennial History of Alfred University; Essays in Change* (Alfred: Alfred University Press, 1985), 51.

first year in 1973 on through the decade. Wood avoided managerial tasks. Instructors William Underhill, Eric Renner, Harland Snodgrass, Val Cushing, Robert Turner, and Glenn Zweygardt, among others, were also involved in the first efforts to build the Foundation Program at Alfred. Snodgrass remembers hours spent in discussion, mapping specific investigations with the other faculty, but also recalls Wood's unpredictability with candor and respect. "Sometimes John walked in with an idea he had that morning in the shower and slowly and obliquely he'd suggest an alternative lesson and we'd go with that."[16] Alternatively, students might become teachers for a day, and present a skill they did best—be it go-go dancing or noise pollution.

The dearth of documents makes it difficult to describe a complete assignment, but a one-page 1973 course description lists "problems" that students grappled with. Several topics were covered in different sequences each year between 1973 and 1976: "drawing – color – structure – form systems – primitive clay – molds – sound – projected images – group dynamics – photography."[17] The emphasis was on liberation and intuition for both students and faculty. Assignments did not focus on objects or products. The Foundation sequences did not simply ask faculty to stretch out of their specialty and/or medium. Wood's assignments were about working outside one's comfort zone. The goal of assigning color to a ceramicist and form to a painter was that faculty and students would boldly find new sources of confidence together. Wood's public confession a decade ago to Alfred students that "I don't feel I have a single demonstrable skill," captures both his conviction and anxiety, and also his ability to instill students with the self-assurance that they too were unbound and full of potential.[18]

"2 x 4 x 8" project, 1975.
In contrast to giving a blank sheet of paper to a drawing class, eight-foot pine two-by-fours were painted white and given to the students to ponder as standardized units of construction and geometric building blocks. The process of modular construction could establish a stable system or explore a dynamic one. The units could be assembled with care or be slid down a staircase, cumulate into a form, delineate a volume, and then be painted and reinvented as an entirely new problem. The panoramic photograph (on page 146) conveys some of the chaos and clumsiness of students marching with the wood, which was easy to hold but long enough to be unwieldy. The photograph of the same exercise on this page illustrates the realization of 'sculpture' as something bigger than oneself physically, intellectually a group effort, and temporary. Both convey the sense of theater that comes with working in a group on an experiment: the thrill of process and discovery. Photograph by Harland Snodgrass.

INVOLVE THE SENSES

Is tension a tool by which to make art? Is a piece of paper to touch or pull on? Foundation emphasized these elementary steps in decision-making, especially tool making. One assignment was to use up a pencil and sheet of paper. Graphite values and shattered pencils glued to a sheet of paper probed the resistance between materials or explored their structural properties in unconventional ways. Wood elegantly but silently demonstrated the nuances and irregular facets of the graphite in a pencil, and professor of ceramics John Gill remembers watching the enrapt students watch the dance of the line on the paper. Former student, colleague and now Dean of the Graduate School at Rhode Island School of Art, Jessie Shefrin remembers elaborating on this investigation of materials. She organized pairs of students to hold a sheet of high-rag-content paper in

16 Harland Snodgrass, interview with the author, telephone, June 27, 2006.
17 Faculty documents, Box 6, Folder 1973-4, Archives, NYSCC.
18 John Wood, artist's talk, Harder Hall, Alfred, NY, April 28, 1995.

"Camouflage" 1981.
Foundation students still conduct a similar painting exercise, no longer using canvas sailor's jackets but Tyvek jumpsuits. The origin of the exercise dates back to László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) organizing courses on camouflage during World War II at Chicago's New Bauhaus (later the Institute of Design). Wood' s interest might derive from his education there in the 1950s or from his experience in the United States Air Force. Photographer unknown.

tension and pull each other across the room. Experiencing the tensile strength of the paper prepared students to realize that it had almost limitless potential. Foundation Program assignments translated sensations into compositions. Another example is Harland Snodgrass's interest in making painting gravitate towards image degradation. His study of color in Foundation involved staring at a painting and making a subsequent painting based on the afterimage, what had "physically congealed in the optic nerve."[19] Involving the senses entailed true collaboration and bona fide experimentation.

Wood's basic engineering lessons included building a self-propelled machine out of paper that could cross the Canacadea Creek running alongside campus. Building geodesic domes of cardboard became a precise study of geometry, while giving eight-foot-long pine two-by-fours to groups required students to converse, share ideas,

haggle over their merits, and collaborate. Former Dean Mario Prisco remembers being surprised at the beauty of a rainbow avalanche when students conceived of the two-by-fours as modular units en masse. They painted them and slid them down the tracks of two handrails in the stadium in a choreographed event.[20]

GIVE KNOWLEDGE OF THE NATURE OF MATERIALS

Alfred alumni and current professors Will Contino and Joseph Scheer remember a Foundation assignment that required them to build something out of paper that could enable them to float in the university's swimming pool.[21] The open-ended exercise prodded them to look around, to scrounge objects that previously seemed foreign or

19 Harland Snodgrass, interview with the author, telephone, June 27, 2006.
20 Mario Prisco (former Dean of the School of Art & Design), interview with the author, Alfred, NY, June 17, 2006.
21 Will Contino and Joseph Scheer, conversation with author, Alfred, NY, February 20, 2007.

"Support Yourself on Water" 1982.
The idea of constructing an efficient structure to support the human body with the least amount of materials prompted investigations of paper. The project had various incarnations. In one variant, crossing Canakadea Creek was the aim. Here, the pool in the gymnasium was used for the flotation devices, and, like the sculptural assignment using pine, the game was to think about the limitations and properties of materials and the ways we cling to specific forms and learn to watch them fall apart. Photographer unknown.

meaningless and reinvent them. The redefinition of drawing in this and other experiments baffled many. For example, some faculty complained that students were not learning "drawing" if they laid paper on the street to record tire treads and footprints.[22] This worrying, based around the "is it art?" question, did not worry Wood so much as the compulsion to ask "why?" and "how?" Such arguments deserve to be placed in historical context: Theo van Doesburg criticized the Bauhaus for "mixing expressionist hysteria with a half-baked religious mystique, and elevating it to a dogma."[23] There are few lasting agreements on how to teach art.

Another example of Wood's unconventional exploration of materials was prying open the conceptual guts of photocopiers. He looked at office machines and saw art tools, potential new ways of working with text and image combination. The machines were also a hidden process to deconstruct. He used photocopier toner as a

drawing material, and painted a box lid with solvent to affix these granules to the paper. The fumes fixed his image. He had converted a machine back to a manual process of greater control, and could open the door to a greater degree of chance.

In the 1980s, Wood's legacy of experiential exercises in Foundation continued because a contingent of the faculty embraced "art as experience." Students had epiphanies making drawings with light, building sound machines, and working with motors and gears, projects more diverse than many versions of Foundation in other art schools. By 1980, Wood's active participation in the program had diminished, but many of his exercises were adopted by others. He shifted to part-time teaching in 1983 but remained influential in teaching collage as a tool and book-making as a philosophy, antipodean forces of ripping and mending. In the overall curriculum, his myriad activities had coalesced

22 Mario Prisco (former Dean of the School of Art & Design), interview with the author, Alfred, NY, June 17, 2006.

23 Frederic J. Schwartz, "Utopia for Sale: The Bauhaus and Weimar Germany's Consumer Culture" in *Bauhaus Culture*, ed. James Chakraborty (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 115.

The pinhole camera was an exciting way to circumvent the complex and costly hardware of cameras that can obscure the medium of photography, to liberate students to take joy in the mechanics of light. From the basic exploration of a box trapping light and an image becoming fixed to paper, students built multiple cameras to work in concert (or to explore conflict), to track movement, and to diagram the passage of time. For Eric Renner, the professor who brought the exercise to Alfred in the early 1970s, the pinhole camera became the focus of his work over subsequent decades. Photograph by Harland Snodgrass, 1970s.

into multiple new hires, so that there were several people who specifically taught printmaking, photography, design, or video. Without Wood, Jessie Shefrin believes, there would not have been a conversation between printmaking and video over how a computer might interface and link dialogue in a richer intramural dynamic. Wood's mantra of "when does one plus one equal three?" fostered collegial experiments with technology as a continual mode of challenging the status quo.[24]

Wood's lessons in using a pinhole camera and building machines that move are still used in Alfred's Foundation Program. He conceived of these as ways "to make three," as tools to challenge our ideas of what a drawing in space might do if our pencil was a different type of matter. His idea of mounting a camera to record a body's movement through a landscape was ultimately not a question of media but of transcription and translation. If he were teaching in Foundation today, perhaps he would be trying to find a way to find the tipping point of an *iPod*.

CONCLUSION

In 1973, Harder Hall was completed, a new building which housed all of the media and art classes that had previously been spread throughout the campus. At first, Harder Hall was a spectacular place in which to teach. The open views of other students were dynamic and engendered collaboration between ceramics and printmaking. In many ways the open plan permitted the crossover thinking fostered in the Foundation program to spread to the rest of the curriculum. However, steady growth in the student body slowly resulted in walls and doors to organize sounds and dirt. Subdivided classrooms were consolidated around media. Those experiments of dropping matter from one place into the sanctum of thought of a different medium became harder to see.

The 1993 mission statement for the Foundation Program reveals the rise of a different generation of art concerns and academic pressures. Until that time, Foundation evaded documented assessment of a bureaucratic nature, but the times demanded clinical self-examination. The co-chairs of the Foundation Program in the 1990s were Mary Lum and Jessie Shefrin. Shefrin had graduated from being Wood's student to being a professor able to make her own commitment to the intersection of technology and art in a vigorous new program, the Institute for Electronic Arts. While she and Lum were determined to keep several ideas and ideals of the 1970s alive, they also wanted to include more contemporary themes and issues. They honored Wood's achievement of building a program "uncensored by categories," but his keywords like "techtonics" and "technics" had drifted into archaisms.[25] Their use of "low-tech" materials sympathized with Wood's interests, aims, and methods. Their commitment to "conceptual" lessons derives from

24 E. Jessie Shefrin, interview with the author, telephone, August 30, 2007.
25 Mary Lum and Jessie Shefrin, "Foundation Handbook: A Working Document," 1993, Box 3, School of Art & Design, Alfred University, Archives, NYSCC.

an inevitable generational change in art-world references.[26] Wood's exploration of the mechanical and technological logic of materials by the likes of the radical engineer and social visionary Buckminster Fuller and Paolo Nervi were indices of Modernist thought from the 1940s through 1960s, and they were superceded by other names and a Postmodernist sensibility. Continuity can be seen in Lum and Shefrin's professorial humility; they title their guidelines for the Foundation Program a "working document," and its vitality is defined in terms of flexibility, adaptability, and fluidity.

Within Alfred, as in other art and design schools over the past two decades, the pace of media and technology continue to challenge instructional methods. The spaces dedicated to specific media continue to proliferate, as much a by-product of the needs of each tool as of any divisional organization. Wood's own interests sprouted into two separate divisions at Alfred, so that photography and printing are two discrete and thriving spheres of activity. Oddly enough, there is no clay used today in the Foundation Program, and John Wood's commitment to technology seems to be an inheritance designated solely to the Division of Expanded Media. But with a small staff such tendencies are writ in water.

The Foundation Program will continue to fluctuate as staff and funds within the School of Art & Design change, and as media become more and less relevant and expensive. Clay and computers, for instance, might intersect in Foundation again if the conversation between two faculty members were to take such a turn. A commemorative plaque erected on Wood's retirement names the north side of the building where photography, printmaking, and the electronic arts are housed: The John Wood Studio. But the legacy of John Wood is less institutional than it is an invisible contour, most easily grasped by listening to students' reminiscences. Although he never sought leadership, Wood was a beloved leader for being permissive and tongue-tied, for being a rule-breaker and a prankster.

As the Foundation Program continues to grow at Alfred, its inventive organizers will need to find new ways to engage in collaborative activities, get students to think outside the boundaries of media, and support experiential art-making. How should we investigate the systems of sensory experiences today? How can process-oriented exercises be more open ended? How can the definitions of art and design be brought into greater collision? Are they being defined afresh?

Wood's success at Alfred stemmed from his rigorous commitment to the profitability of risk-taking. His breadth of influences and his dexterity kept him restless. His particular vision for the Foundation Program is a lesson to individual teachers and administrators alike about the value of experimentation. Students in Foundation who found the poetry residing in primary engineering principles walked away with more confidence in their own tool-building than any reductive lesson in value, form, or color theory could offer. Some of Wood's students did not enjoy perching on a cinderblock and physically confronting their teacher. But, if students grasped the fragility of color, texture, and life from the trajectory of a dropped egg and other idiosyncratic but fundamental activities, then most likely they were grinning as they walked away from class. John Wood's lasting impact is that all of his students sense the pleasure he took in his work, and continue to think that an inconclusive search is a fairly good start toward making something that might become art.

26 Ibid.